



The great, all-female MP portrait takeover

By Phil Coomes
December 16, 2018



Seema Kennedy MP by Julia Fullerton-Batten

If ever there was an argument to give photographers free rein on a project, the exhibition *209 Women on show* at Portcullis House in London is just that. It comprises portraits of current female MPs, shot by female photographers, and it is a real delight.

The photographs are grouped by various themes such as colour of clothing, setting, or just a certain mood.

The beauty of this show is in its diversity of styles, from classic portraits to those taken by commercial or fashion photographers.

"I wanted to give the photographers the total freedom of expression," says Hilary Wood founder of *209 Women* and one of the curators of the show. She says she wanted something new, not just pictures of men by men.

"This show bring visibility to those women who are leading change," she says.

Some of the photographers selected to photograph the politicians are well established, others are fresh out of university.

Julia Fullerton-Batten, best known for her exquisite fine art portraits, photographed Seema Kennedy, Conservative MP for South Ribble in Lancashire and private secretary to the prime minister.

Fullerton-Batten began by researching locations for the picture, settling on St Stephen's Hall in Westminster.

"The reason I loved it was because all these statues standing around Seema are male politicians from the past," says Fullerton-Batten.

"Yet here we have this 21st Century, strong, elegant lady. It is that juxtaposition that is striking."

It was one of the more complex shoots of the project due to the amount of lighting needed, all of which had to be wheeled through the corridors of Westminster.

The outfit is by Vivienne Westwood and was only sourced the night before, following many days of searching for the right one in vintage designer shops and online. It's an inspired choice, the tone of the dress merging with the surroundings and echoing the checkerboard shapes on the floor.

Belfast-born photographer Hannah Starkey photographed Yvette Cooper, Labour MP for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford, at a restaurant not far from where she lives. It was a location discovered by chance.

"It is about trying to take a portrait that isn't about scrutinising or judging, to take it out of that sphere and make it more complex," says Starkey who added some of the small flowers into the background of the image.

Before the shoot, she wanted to get to know Cooper and shadowed her at work in her constituency for a day.

"It really opened my eyes to what MPs have to do, from the very small grass roots to the big issues," she says.

"I was so impressed with her. I'm from Belfast and have seen women do amazing things during the Troubles, and just seeing her in action in people's houses was so impressive. It was a bit like going back to Belfast and seeing what can be done when women speak out."

Speaking about the show as a whole, Starkey describes it as an "amazing project to pull together. Very democratic with lots of styles on show".

"To draw together so many different photographers from across the country and different background is really interesting," she says.

In other words, it's a perfect way to mark 100 years since some women achieved the right to vote. That said, women only make up just over 30% of all MPs, so there is still a way to go.